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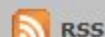
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Mayor invites U.S. forces to tour model town

May 19, 2010

By **Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod**



Photo credit **Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod**

Myeser Abdol Mohsin Freh, mayor of Barwana, Iraq, shows paratroopers with 3rd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Advise and Assist Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, a soccer stadium for the town's youth, funded by U.S. forces, during a tour of his town May 13, 2010. Twelve teams of 20 players use the soccer field.

AL ASAD AIR BASE, Iraq (Army News Service, May 19, 2010) -- The mayor of an Iraqi town once completely controlled by the insurgency invited a platoon of paratroopers to tour his peaceful city with him May 13.

Mayor Myeser Abdol Mohsin Freh hosted Battery B, 3rd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Advise and Assist Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, on a tour of Barwana, a small town on the eastern shore of the Euphrates River across from larger Haditha in Iraq's desert Al Anbar province.

TOP STORY



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"I am proud of my city," Myeser told 1st Lt. Samuel Banks, leader of 2nd platoon. "The best part of our story is how the U.S. forces helped the dream of freedom come true for Barwana."

The group visited the town's new soccer stadium, a water project that provides potable water for half of Barwana's 20,000 residents, and the site of a planned youth recreational facility.

"The insurgents blew up the old police station here," the mayor explained to the group, who had gathered in a walled-in acre of land on the town's main street. "Instead of rebuilding it, we are going to make this area a place where everyone can enjoy themselves."

On a Thursday afternoon, the streets were crowded with people preparing for Friday, the beginning of the Iraqi weekend. Young boys at one of two bridges connecting Barwana to Haditha dove and flipped off pontoons, amusing the Soldiers. They tried to coax the Americans into the water.

"It is very safe now in Barwana," said Adnan, an employer who works for the government. "My children can go to school and move about town freely. The mayor has done a very good job, and we feel safe because we see the police about."

Abdol Salam Madalla, a 34-year-old handyman and father of five who was born in Barwana, said it has been more than a year since he has worried about the safety of his family.

"We never recognized a difference between al-Qaeda and the insurgents. We just knew they were all bad. But they are gone now," he said.

Abdul said he recognized most of the Iraqi policemen in Barwana as neighbors.

"Last time I saw an American soldier was about a year ago," he said. "Normally, when we see U.S. forces, we feel a little fear, but we feel safe at the same time."

Though the paratroopers of 3-319th have partnered with local Iraqi Security Forces since 2009 (principally the 27th Brigade, 7th Division), requiring an Iraqi escort to enter the city reduces their exposure to the townspeople.

"Before I got here, Bravo Battery had already established a relationship with the leadership of their city council, mayor and police," said Banks. The paratroopers delivered 200 humanitarian aid packages twice this year, he said.

"We are partners to boost their security, and we give them some materiel support, but not much," he said. "To be honest, they do not ask for much. They are pretty independent."

Though the trip to Barwana was his first, Spc. Travis Benefiel, a former Marine now serving with the Army, remembers a very different Haditha of just a few years earlier.

"We had constant [improvised explosive devices], small-arms fire, mortar fire and rocket fire," said Benefiel. "It was very dangerous -- lots of suicide bombers and vehicle-borne IEDs. I lost quite a few friends."

According to the mayor, following the invasion, Barwana was under the control of coalition forces, though the main effort was protecting Haditha Dam upstream.

Insurgent groups began filtering into town after 2004 and immediately threatened local security forces. Mayor Achmed Mohatna quit, and the other city leaders fled to Baghdad.

The town fell under the control of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and a new government containing al-Qaeda and insurgents.

"They used to do just one thing in the city," said Myeser. "Killing."

Insurgents controlled everything in the city, stopping inbound delivery trucks and stealing their goods. They killed anyone they wanted to and left the bodies in the streets for people to see. They killed on suspicion, even for saying a single word, said Myeser.

"If they knew of anyone working with the government, police or military, they would slaughter him, cut off his head and send his head to his family," he said.

In 2007, the Americans and Iraqi Security Forces entered Barwana and cut off all travel to and from the city at the two bridges and the few roads leading across the desert.

"It was very hard to get through the checkpoints," said Myeser. "For a while, the civilians suffered. We didn't have a hospital for major operations. If people wanted to leave the city, they had two choices: take a boat or drive 200 kilometers by truck around the checkpoints."

In 24 hours, most of the insurgent groups left the city, said Myeser.

According to Barwana Police Chief Maj. Mohammad, U.S. forces stayed inside the city for two years. In February 2007, the town reconstituted a police force. Within six months, policemen were walking the streets without helmet or body armor.

"We worked together with the U.S. and fought the insurgents relentlessly," said Mohammad. "Now there is no insurgency left inside the city. If the insurgency tries to reactivate, we will discover them and detain them."

In 2007, Myeser returned from Baghdad, where he had been practicing law since 2001. With other town leaders, he formed a local government. Their immediate focus was to provide residents with clean water, healthcare and power.

They asked the central and provincial governments for aid, and even traveled to Ramadi to petition important tribal sheikhs, but nobody offered to help.

"Nobody except the U.S. Army and Marines," said Myeser. "They were our brothers and they supported us until the city stood up."

U.S. military civil affairs funded three water and three power projects, supplied materials and devices to medical clinics, rebuilt a number of schools and provided books and other learning materials, rebuilt the municipal building, supplied city dumpsters, refurbished the roads and provided unlimited support to local IP, he said.

Additionally, U.S. Special Forces funded nine projects, including a soccer field, a clinic, computers for the schools, two electric projects, and a water project. They also conducted many operations with the police.

It wasn't long before the townspeople realized that partnered U.S. military and Iraqi Security Forces had more to offer than the insurgent groups. U.S. forces supplied the power, IPs supplied the human intelligence, and the remaining insurgent elements were rooted from the town.

There is little doubt that the island-like nature of Barwana - surrounded by desert and only accessible to the network of roads on the west bank of the Euphrates by two bridges - made the job of cherry-picking insurgents from the population much easier than it might have been in a town with a more porous border, said Banks' battery commander, Capt. Max Caylor. Still, he said, the leaders of Barwana did many things right, and so did U.S. forces.

When police and municipal workers were not getting paid, U.S. forces petitioned the provincial government in Ramadi until the issue was remedied. Homeowners were compensated by U.S. forces for damage to their property that occurred during the pursuit of insurgents.

"Just about everybody has been paid by now," said Myeser.

The last U.S. Soldier left Barwana July 13, 2007, he said.

"Though they handed over security to the local government and police, we have continued our relationship with U.S. forces.

"I want the families of fallen [U.S.] Soldiers to know that I never felt like they invaded Barwana. I saw them as brothers bringing freedom to Barwana. Without their working side-by-side with us, we would not be successful. In time, everybody left us, but they stayed by our side," said the mayor.

Were it his decision, Myeser would extend the U.S. presence in Iraq four more years until loyalties of Iraqis and especially their security forces align more with the country and less with political parties, he said.

Sgt. 1st Class Jason Reininger, a platoon sergeant, knows what it's like to spend four years in Iraq. On his seventh deployment with the Army and fourth to Iraq, the visit to Barwana helped him feel that the buddies he lost in combat here in Iraq did not die in vain.

"Today I saw a community doing things for themselves, accepting U.S. support, and doing great things with it," said Reininger. "I saw a soccer stadium -- grass, sprinkler systems -- funds that were put to good use. And a water treatment plant that was new and working."

Reininger said his fallen comrades would be proud of how the people of Barwana were honoring the sacrifices they and their families had paid and continue to pay for Iraqi freedom.

"If people want to know what we're doing over here, they should look at this community," he said. "I would hope that other communities around Iraq would look at what they're doing to make themselves better."

(Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod writes for 1/82 AAB, USD-C)

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Face of Defense: Physician Assistant Cares for Troops, Local Iraqis

By Army Sgt. Michael MacLeod
1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division Public Affairs Office

AL ASAD AIR BASE, Iraq, July 15, 2010 – During a clinical rotation at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, physician assistant student Jessica Larson made up her mind to join the Army.



Army 1st Lt. Jessica Larson, a physician assistant with 307th Brigade Support Battalion, 1st Advise and Assist Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, treats an Iraqi child during a one-day, combined U.S.-Iraqi medical clinic in Kubaysah, Iraq, June 6, 2010. U.S. Army photo by Spc. Katie Summerhill (Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

At the Center for the Intrepid, Larson worked with severely wounded warriors, and from them she drew a singular inspiration.

"They were still proud to be in the Army, and they were working really hard to rehabilitate themselves and to do the best they had with what they had," said Larson, now a physician assistant and a first lieutenant with the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Advise and Assist Brigade, deployed in Iraq since August 2009.

"This is what life dealt me; this is what I am working with, and now it's time for me to move on. There is no feeling sorry for yourself here." That was the attitude that all the soldiers had," Larson said. "It was really inspiring."

At age 28, with years invested in a career designing airports for domestic and international markets, Larson, a Chicago native, decided she wanted more than a big paycheck and a corner office.

"I asked myself, if I could start over and do anything at all, what would I do? And I realized that I've always wanted to be in medicine and never had the guts to try it," she said.

Of all the career options, medicine was the one thing that resonated and stuck, Larson said. However, the Army was never part of the plan until she "met someone who knew someone" during PA school clinical rotations.

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The Army intrigued her, but Larson wanted to be sure she could handle being around the worst of combat injuries before committing. She recalled being deeply impressed by the bravery and stoicism of the severely wounded soldiers, including amputees, she'd met.

"That is when I made my decision to join the Army," Larson said. "If these guys could give up multiple limbs for their country, the least I could do was to give three years of my life."

Not too long after that, the newly-minted PA found herself caring for the soldiers of an airborne logistics unit, the 307th Brigade Support Battalion, deployed in Iraq's largest and historically most volatile province, al Anbar.

"I found that in the military, I was catering to a completely different population than I thought I would be," said Larson, who initially wanted to practice international medicine in areas with little access to medical care, such as Africa's Swaziland.

"My guys – the guys I treat – are convoy security, and that's not a very 'sexy' job and not often glorified. I really enjoy taking care of them," she said. "Even though it's not humanitarian aid in Africa, I feel like it's an incredibly worthy cause. I am very satisfied with it."

As it turns out, through the advise-and-assist mission of professionalizing Iraqi security forces in Anbar, Larson also gets to care for people who might otherwise never receive medical attention. The U.S. paratroopers, she said, have sponsored temporary medical clinics for the poorer, more rural towns and villages up and down the western Euphrates River Valley in partnership with the Iraqi army, police and local doctors. Often, hundreds of ailing Iraqis, she noted, receive medical treatment at the clinics each day.

Larson said some of her soldier-comrades are puzzled as to why she left her corner office and high-paying job for the Army.

"I don't miss my former lifestyle at all," she emphasized. "I was miserable, and I'm not miserable now."

She tells her younger medics that knowing what you don't want to do is just as important as knowing what you want to do. Don't do things just for the money and don't choose things because they are easy, she counsels them.

When Larson joined the Army, she recalled, her mother was shocked, and cried.

"My mom was like, 'What are you doing? You are going to deploy. You could get hurt,'" Larson said. "But now my mother is the most ridiculously proud woman on the planet."

The daily challenge of medicine, Larson said, is what keeps her enthused in her job. And, she added, unlike some other occupations, there always is more to learn in medicine.

"It's worth it to me," Larson said. "It's an honor serving these guys who are fighting for us and out there doing the grunge work."

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Roadside bomb hunters find subtle shift in Iraqi culture

Mar 29, 2010

By **Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod** 1/82 AAB, USD-C



Photo Credit: U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod, 1/82 AAB, USD-C.

CAMP RAMADI, Iraq - Spc. Sean Miller, a combat engineer with Company A, 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division (Advise and Assist), stands in front of vehicles at Camp Ramadi, Iraq, March 23 that are used in route-clearing operations. Originally from Kissimmee, Fla., Miller has served in the Army two years. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod, 1/82 AAB, USD-C)



Biden meets Karzai, visits troops in Afghanistan

CAMP RAMADI, Iraq - There is a tendency here in Iraq to cast any story in its shadow, to find meaning in not what is but from what was.

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Recasting the peace among Anbaris during the recent national election in such terms, we might recall how, only two years ago, a U.S. military official declared Al Anbar province lost. What a difference.

In more clinical terms, the 50 attacks during September 2009 are astounding weighed against the 1,350 in March of 2007.

However, the constant breathing of life into the past can give it legs of its own: continuing a well-worn narrative, a journalist declares that "a series of blasts shattered the peace in the months leading up to the election," as if the past is the rightful heir to the future, as though a marketing campaign by a handful of terrorists is enough to negate the efforts of a hundred-thousand boots on the ground and the hopes and determination of millions of Iraqi citizens grown tired of anguish and turmoil.

Sometimes, as 2nd Lt. Andrew Berreth discovered during a recent visit to an Iraqi police checkpoint, it's the subtle shifts, the casual comments, what fringe has grown from the new fabric of Iraqi life that let on where they are as a people and a nation. Just as cattails growing along a water's margin best describe a relative tranquility - the germination of a new way can be both subtle and dramatic.

Berreth is a platoon leader of a route-clearance team: 3rd platoon, Company A, 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division (Advise and Assist). His platoon hunts for roadside bombs. The brigade is of a special type, one developed specifically to partner with Iraqi police and army to harden and sharpen their skills in what time is left of the American occupation.

Two other engineering platoons in his company are partnered with Iraqi army troops to teach them the latest in route-clearing techniques and tactics - one with 7th Iraqi Army Division in Al Asad, the other with 1st Division in Fallujah. Berreth's team, however, is not partnered, but rather, provides a foundational service - keeping the main supply routes clear and safe for the brigade's other activities to continue. In seven months, 1/82 AAB has taken no casualties to improvised explosive devices.

"We aren't finding much lately," says Berreth. "We'll stop and talk with IP to gather intelligence, find out what they need, and figure out what we can do to assist them. Our advise-and-assist role is to gauge the workability of the traffic control points and to see if they can be improved upon."

The platoon's activity moves in tidal rhythm, regular yet unpredictable. The route, the time and the meetings with IP vary nightly, but nightly they go outside the wire. Many of his Soldiers eat only one meal a day because they work through the night and sleep in the day.

Leaving the hard lights of Camp Ramadi's entry control points the night of March 23, three combat engineers in the second of several Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles sing a country song, poetic to the moment:

"That's the story of my life right there in black and white," they twang. "You should have seen it in color."

In color, the driver, Pfc. Zachary McCoy, is an offroad enthusiast from southern Illinois. Truck commander, Sgt. Chris Jorgensen, is a former framing carpenter from Chicago, soon to be heading for engineering school. The gunner, with his thumbs near the butterfly trigger of the .50-caliber machine gun, is Pfc. Chad Turner from Nashville, Tenn. He favored Garth Brooks, Jason Aldean and Tim McGraw.

Tonight, in black and white, they're IED hunters. As Turner swivels in the gun turret, Jorgensen tests his threat awareness.

"Turner, is it only around bridges that we watch for RKG-3 grenades?"

"Negative, sar'nt," Turner replies. "Urban areas or any area with cover for people to hide."

It goes like that throughout the night. Far from being insulted, the junior Soldiers relish the chance to sharpen these skills that keep them alive; still comes the occasional retort:

"Turner, do you see the low wires?"

Turner is eyeball to plastic with the wires. "Doing big things up here, sar'nt. I got the wires," he replies.

Over the radio, there is chatter between the vehicles. "Husky," someone says, "be advised there is a vehicle between me and you." Then a wisecrack, "Do not be afraid. I am here to protect you."

Since November, the platoon has found three IEDs, none causing injury.

"We see plenty of dead donkeys along the road," says Turner.

"And that monkey," adds McCoy.

"We swear we've seen a monkey twice," laughs Turner. "The most remarkable thing we've seen is in the improved construction of IP check points."

Outside Ramadi, the IED hunters stop at an IP check point to visit with the police. Berreth dismounts his MRAP as does Jorgensen and a handful of others.

Along this stretch of road, there is little noise beside the banter of policemen and U.S. troops. Semi-feral dogs wander in the periphery of light cast by the station's floods.

First Lt. Haithem, the officer in charge of the dozen policemen gathered to chat with the Americans, reports that the situation is very stable and safe.

"We can walk outside anytime, daylight or dark, and as you can see, everything is safe," he says.

Haithem has been stationed here for two-and-a-half years. He says his men have learned much from the Americans, techniques such as searching and how to approach dangerous targets. Skills that keep his men alive.

But as much as his men enjoy visiting with the Americans, it is good that they are leaving, he says.

"If you stay here, I am going to depend on you. I am going to do nothing."

Berreth asks the silver-haired police officer whether all his men voted in the recent national elections.

"All of my men, without exception," he replies.

"Congratulations on a successful vote."

"We hope," Haithem says wistfully, "We hope everything is okay after the election results are announced."

And casually, as if he were talking to a neighbor, the Iraqi says, "We congratulate you on the health care plan in America."

Mildly shocked, Berreth is taken aback.

"You track our news?" he asks.


"Yes we do," responds Ali, another policeman.


"We saw President Obama, and he was so excited and happy."

And, tempted to engage the Iraqis on the health care debate, the American paratroopers realize the subtle and astonishing change that had occurred, said Berreth.

Saddam had kept his subjects blinded to the world by prohibiting Internet and cell phones; insurgent and terrorist violence had kept them too afraid and too busy to care. With peace and stability and the tools of a modern, free society on the table before them, Iraqis are picking them up and becoming world citizens. They know what's going on.

"You could stay here five years more, maybe 10," says Haithem, "but then we will do nothing. You have taught us very well, and as you see, all the police are doing their jobs. It is very peaceful now."

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Biden meets Karzai, visits troops in Afghanistan

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Army couple runs 50 miles for wounded warriors

Mar 24, 2010

By **Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod**



Photo Credit: Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod.

Sgt. 1st Class Jason Bruch, a platoon sergeant and military policeman with 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division (Advise and Assist), prepares to begin a 50-mile run to celebrate the strength and resilience of America's wounded warriors March 20, 2010, at Camp Ramadi, Iraq. Tammy Bruch, his wife and an Army Reserve member, also ran 50 miles at Fort Bragg, N.C., at

CAMP RAMADI, Iraq (Army News Service March 24, 2010) -- Separated by seven time zones, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, a deployed U.S. paratrooper and his stateside wife celebrated the strength and resiliency of America's wounded warriors with synchronized 50-mile runs March 20-21.

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Sgt. 1st Class Jason Bruch, a platoon sergeant and military policeman with the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team, and Tammy Bruch, a doctoral candidate at University of North Carolina, each ran 50 miles, supported by friends, relatives and Jason's unit, 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion.

"I've had a lot of guys get [post traumatic stress disorder], and they have to live with it the rest of their lives. I want to let them and the many other wounded warriors know they are not forgotten," said Jason, who is on his fourth deployment to Iraq.

The idea came to the couple through Jason's interaction with Operation Proper Exit, a program that allows wounded servicemembers to visit the place of their injury to enable psychological healing.

He was also influenced by 2nd Lt. Richard Ingram, a Soldier he currently serves with who lost his left arm to an improvised explosive device during a prior deployment to Iraq.

The date, March 20, was picked because it is the anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

"This is a great project for a very special group," said Lt. Col. Douglas Stitt, commander of 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion. "He's willing to go the extra mile and then some," Stitt said.

"We have a bunch of Soldiers who care about our fellow Soldier, those who have been wounded in combat and those who are not able to get out and maybe participate the way they want," added Command Sgt. Maj. John Martin Jr., the highest-ranking enlisted Soldier in the battalion.

Jason made ten five-mile laps around Camp Ramadi, the U.S. military base where his unit has been deployed since August 2009. Tammy's course traveled around Fort Bragg, N.C., and neighboring Pope Air Force Base.

Jason's run began at dusk; Tammy's began several hours after sunrise.

"I could not believe how many people were inspired by what Jason and I were doing -- the support and encouragement was really overwhelming," said Tammy, now a reservist who left active duty in 2007.

The 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion rear detachment and Jason's relatives organized individuals to run with Tammy, and many of her relatives traveled from out of town to support her. More than a dozen women from the company Family Readiness Group pushed strollers along part of the course in support, she said.

On Camp Ramadi, the run drew 30 participants, though many fewer planned to run the entire 50 miles.

One of those who did was Lt. Col. Mark Jablow, commander of the 82 Expeditionary Air Support Operations Squad out of Baghdad, who was visiting his airmen in Ramadi.

Though Jablow runs several marathons a year, the farthest the Brooklyn, N.Y., native had run prior to the Wounded Warrior Run was 36 miles, around the island of Diego Garcia.

"I'll run any race and run any distance to be with the guys," said Jablow. "It never entered my mind that I would not finish, though after 35 miles, it was kind of rough."

In addition to the runners, several paratroopers marched 15 miles with rucksacks, and one, 25 miles. Members of Jason's squad provided much of the support.

"If it wasn't for all these aid stations out here and all these people out here pushing me, there's no way I would have made it," said Jason, who finished the run in 9 hours, 32 minutes.

Before this run, his farthest distance had been 35 miles. "I hit the wall at 20, 35 and 45 miles," he said of the sensation familiar to marathon runners with total energy depletion.

The couple met while deployed to Baghdad in 2005. Tammy introduced Jason to long-distance running.

"When we first met, she could smoke me," he said.

One of Tammy's goals is to run a marathon in every state. She has run four marathons since Jason deployed in August.



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Evolving wounded warrior program returns to Iraq

Jan 4, 2010

By **Spc. Michael J. MacLeod**



Photo credit **Spc. Michael J. MacLeod**

Command Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Wilson, the highest-ranking enlisted soldier of United States Force - Iraq, accompanies Sgt. 1st Class Mike Schlitz, a wounded warrior returning to Iraq as part of Operation Proper Exit, Dec. 29, 2009, at Camp Ramadi, Iraq. The program, in its third installment, returns severely-wounded veterans to the battlefield where they were wounded to help them find psychological closure.

CAMP RAMADI, Iraq (Army News Service, Jan. 4, 2010) -- Five severely-wounded veterans returned to Iraq just after the 2009 Christmas holiday as part of the third installment of an evolving program to help wounded warriors heal from traumatic combat injuries.

The group, consisting of amputees and severe-burn victims, visited deployed paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division as part of Operation Proper Exit, a program designed to return the injured to the scene of their battlefield injuries to help them find psychological closure.

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Biden meets Karzai, visits troops in Afghanistan

Vice President Joe Biden today spoke with Afghan

Richard Kell, founder of the nonprofit Troops First Foundation that runs the program, estimates the number of wounded Iraq veterans who fit its criteria -- those that are mentally and physically moving forward with a recovery plan -- to be between 1,000 and 1,500.

In its third rendition since June, the program has now helped 18 wounded Soldiers and Marines move on with their lives, said Kell.

"Can we really make a dent? We're gonna try," he said.

The goal is to make one trip per month following the Iraqi national elections in early 2010.

While Kell does not expect to get the majority to Iraq before U.S. forces leave in 2011, he and the program's other principles, Col. David Sutherland, a former brigade commander in Diyala province, and Command Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Wilson, the highest-ranking enlisted Soldier of United States Force - Iraq, are considering ways to multiply the reach of the program.

"Lots of 'gold star' families would like to come here to find closure as well, to see where their loved ones died," said Kell. "We've considered making our alumni available to talk to those families, so that they can tell them that their sacrifices have extreme value here in Iraq."

That kind of mentorship from prior participants has already been leveraged by Operation Proper Exit by asking one wounded warrior from each trip to act as a mentor for the next -- a role fulfilled on the first trip by Sutherland.

"This time we brought back Sgt. 1st Class [Joshua] Olson, who is a great [noncommissioned officer]," said Kell. "I'm learning what that's all about. He looks after his fellow Soldiers very well."

Having an alum return as a military mentor with following groups is the most significant structural change to the program, he said. Additionally, the program has also reduced the number of meetings and command briefs to allow wounded warriors maximum time with Soldiers on the ground.

"That's the most effective use of their time," said Kell.

However, the greatest change from trip to trip is the identity that each group takes on, he said.

"The first group viewed themselves as ambassadors to keep the door open for future trips. They made sure that, when they did talk to the press, they were very honest and truthful about their experiences," Kell said.

"The second group wanted to report back to families of their fallen comrades that their sacrifices were not in vain, that they had significant meaning, and that they added a great deal to the quality of life here in Iraq and potential for long-term security," Kell said. "I think they found that to be true."

This trip Kell said, is shaping up to be called "Schlitz's trip." Sgt. 1st Class Mike Schlitz was burned over 85 percent of his body -- the remaining 15 percent, Kell said, was harvested by doctors for skin grafts.

"His ability to reach out and want to make other people feel good is an amazing quality," Kell said. "This isn't to take anything from the other warriors, but I think we will all leave here changed [by him]."

While one of Schlitz's future goals is to continue with small-venue public speaking, some participants prefer to avoid the media during the Operation Proper Exit trips.

"We let the press be the warriors' own decision," said Kell.

"If five out of five of our current group chose not to have their photographs taken or talk to the media, the reality is, that's okay," he said. "We also guarantee them that, if they do agree to talk to the press and it does become a burden, we will end it."

Kell cited an incident with a reporter who attempted to interview two wounded warriors during a visit to a war memorial at Forward Operating Base Normandy. The reporter was asked to stand down.

"Ironically, that moment of separation helped him gain greater insight into what this program is all about, and it came through in the article he wrote," said Kell.

As the five wounded warriors told their stories to more than 100 Soldiers at a "town hall" meeting at Camp Ramadi, Kell made one last point.

"We're not going to make the Soldiers make that decision before they get here," he said. "What you see is five Soldiers in here that want to tell their stories, and they're getting encouraged to tell their stories, and they're getting comfortable with telling their stories. I would tell you a week ago I'm not so sure they all felt they would be sitting in there doing this."

(Spc. Michael J. MacLeod writes for 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division (Advise and Assist Brigade))

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Wounded warriors encourage paratroopers to help stop Soldier suicides

Apr 13, 2010

By **Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod**



Photo Credit: Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod.

Retired Sgt. 1st Class Michael Schlitz, a veteran who was severely injured by an improvised explosive device in Baghdad during the troop surge, talks to paratroopers at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, about suicide prevention. Schlitz told his audience that it was their responsibility to take care of their battle buddies' emotional health.



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AL ASAD AIR BASE, Iraq (Army News Service, April 13, 2010) -- Eight battle-wounded veterans of the Iraq war shared lessons learned from their recovery processes with paratroopers here April 6, including advice on suicide prevention.

Part of the fifth Operation Proper Exit rotation of Soldiers returning to the battlefield to find emotional healing, the wounded warriors engaged in a town-hall discussion at Al Asad's Camp Ripper with paratroopers of the 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division (Advise and Assist Brigade).

"If anyone in your unit unfortunately commits suicide, it's kind of on you guys," said retired Sgt. 1st Class Mike Schlitz, a 33-year-old Ranger-qualified Soldier who was severely burned by an improvised explosive device in Baghdad in 2007.

Though Schlitz received burns over 85 percent of his body, lost both hands and was left with a severely-disfigured face, he spoke with unabashed authority.

Often using humor to approach difficult subjects, his first words reflected back on his own experience of nearly burning to death.

"If you're going to commit suicide by fire, make sure there're no fire extinguishers or people around to help you, or you're going to end up looking like me," he said with a smile.

Once the audience stopped laughing, Schlitz offered serious advice on suicide prevention.

"One thing the Army has is a great peer support group," said Schlitz. "When you're hurt and at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, you have guys who have been there coming down to talk to you to build you back up. They say, 'Hey, life goes on. Look how good I'm doing now,' and that pushes you to go on."

"Out here, you have to look to your left and right to see if your buddy is doing okay, because if he's not, it's up to you to pick him back up. If someone commits suicide, it's that person to the left or right who didn't do their job," said Schlitz.

As the 1st Brigade of the 82nd prepares to redeploy soon, paratroopers need to support each other for the transition to life back home, he said.

"Leaders, that's on you too," he added.

Peer support is also a critical part of the healing process for servicemembers injured in combat, said retired Staff Sgt. Brian Neuman, who lost his left arm to an explosively-formed projectile that blew through his M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle in Fallujah in 2004.

"When I got to the medic, I had my left arm in my right hand," he said. "I had no time to think about things."

Once he had time to process his thoughts, Neuman said, the first emotion he felt was guilt. "I knew my guys were still out there," he said.

"If a friend gets hurt, they're going to get the best medical care, but they're still going to worry about the guys still back in the fight," agreed Schlitz. "Send him an email. Make him feel like he's still in the fight."

Schlitz suggested that leaders might send rear-detachment Soldiers to visit the recovering wounded at the hospital.

"It's not about actually knowing the Soldier; it's about that Soldier seeing the uniform and that identical patch on the shoulder to give that support," he said. "Make that wounded guy feel like he's still in the fight so he's motivated to get better."

Maj. David Underwood, who was wounded with retired Cpl. Bryan Hinojosa in 2008 by the same IED, cautioned paratroopers to be extra vigilant against accidents.

The group of wounded warriors was recently briefed by top military officials that almost half of the nearly 5,000 U.S. casualties in Iraq were non-tactical deaths, he said, including 25 deaths in the last year from vehicle rollovers and motor pool accidents.

The veterans returned to Iraq to leave the battlefield on their own terms and to see that their sacrifices were achieving change in Iraq, they said.

"I flew over Fallujah yesterday," said Neuman. "I saw the street where I was hit. We didn't get shot at. I haven't heard any explosions since I've been here."

"Last time I was carried away. I want to get out on my own this time," said retired Sgt. Juan Arredondo, who lost an arm to an IED in Ramadi in 2005. "Of course, I haven't made it out yet," he joked.

"We're here for you guys," said Sgt. Robert Brown, now a Paralympics athlete who was returning for his third time with Operation Proper Exit.

"Why return?" asked Neuman. "Though I am now involved in very successful financial services, I still get a nagging feeling living in a military town of never knowing where I could have been had I stayed in the Army. There's nothing like being a part of this team," he said.

Following the town hall meeting, the group traveled by helicopter back to Camp Liberty in Baghdad.

The route included one long detour, over the town of Rawah near the Syrian border, so that one of the wounded warriors could see for a final time the road where a massive IED broke his jaw and took his right leg.

Operation Proper Exit is expected to continue until U.S. troops have withdrawn from Iraq.

(Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod serves with the 82nd Airborne Public Affairs Office.)

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Wounded warriors spur recovery with Iraq visit

May 20, 2010

By **Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod**



Photo Credit: Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod.

Paratroopers with 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division (Advise and Assist) ask questions of wounded warriors visiting Camp Ramadi, Iraq, May 10, 2010, with Operation Proper Exit. This is the sixth group of severely-wounded veterans to visit Iraq since the program began in 2009.

CAMP RAMADI, Iraq (Army News Service, May 20, 2010) -- Mothers or any family member or friend can play a pivotal role in the recovery of servicemembers severely wounded in combat, according to wounded veterans visiting here the day after Mother's Day.

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Ten wounded warriors told their stories of recovery to paratroopers of 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division (Advise and Assist), May 10, in the latest tour of Operation Proper Exit, a program designed to provide closure to severely wounded veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom by returning them to the site of their injury.

"Whether it's mom or dad or a wife or a brother, the family support that wounded warriors receive helps them tremendously through the healing process and recovery," said Richard Kell, executive director of Troops First Foundation and leader of the sixth OPE tour.

"We've seen warriors less fortunate, who don't have that mom or dad or someone particularly close to them to spend time as a medical attendant in the hospital with them, and in general, those warriors without that type of support do not move as quickly through recovery," he said.

So far as OPE goes, it's a common mom thing to say, "You really don't need to go back to Iraq. Why don't you just take leave and come visit here instead?" said Staff Sgt. Brian Beem, who lost a lower leg to a highly-lethal explosively-formed projectile roadside bomb while deployed in Baghdad with 172nd Stryker Brigade out of Fort Wainwright, Alaska.

Beem, who returned to his former unit upon recovery, said that his wife read about OPE in a local paper and wrote Kell an email in his name that said, "Hi, my name is Brian. I am an amputee. Can I go back to Iraq?"

Beem wanted to return to Iraq to see that his sacrifices and those of his friends had made a difference.

"It's incredible doing a flyover to see how different the cities look," he said of the flight over Fallujah and Ramadi. "It's almost insulting how low we can fly without people shooting at us."

Kell told the audience of paratroopers who had come to ask questions of the wounded warriors that their own Command Sgt. Maj. LaMarquis Knowles had recently made a big difference in a servicemember's life when he took time out of his stateside leave to visit a Navy corpsman wounded by a sniper in downtown Ramadi this year.

"She said it was the best visit she's had since being injured," said Kell.

When injured warriors are contacted by people in their unit or area of operation, they are less likely to feel alienated during recovery, he said.

Retired Spc. Brent Hendrix, a cavalry scout with 172nd Stryker Brigade who had to be revived three times and endure 66 major surgeries since surviving a massive IED attack in June 2006 in Rawah, Iraq, said he continues to be inspired by people with injuries like his who have successfully transitioned to a normalized life.

"I lost my leg at the age of 22, and now I have to go the rest of my life with my amputation, but I saw this little kid who was about three years old who had lost his leg through birth," said Hendrix.

"I was six-foot-seven and he was something like two foot, and he would look at me and always shake my hand. That little kid looked up to me because I looked like him. That still inspires me," he said.

Capt. D.J. Skelton, who suffered the loss of an eye and several other injuries from a rocket-propelled grenade, said it was his sergeant who inspired him to persevere.

"He would roll his wheelchair into my room every day, but I spent five months in bed refusing to do physical therapy. Then one day he came in on prosthetic legs. The next day, I began," he said.

For retired Sgt. Noah Galloway who lost an arm and a leg from a roadside bomb, the same initiative that drove him to excel in the military helped push him as a civilian. Many wounded warriors, he noted, pursue recovery and achievement through sports.

"The Paralympics is the second-largest sporting event in the world," he said. "Every four years, it takes place a couple weeks after the Olympics at the same place. As big as it is, it's not played on TV here. You go to another country, it's a big event. It's slowly starting to creep into America because you've got all these veterans getting into these sporting events and the rest of America wants to see them compete."

Galloway credits his young children for making his amputations seem less grave.

"When my kids want to go outside, they know I have to put my leg on, so they drag my leg to me. Or if I'm hopping around the house without my leg, I'll turn around and there will be a train of kids hopping on one leg behind me."

The tour was OPE's largest to date, with 10 participants.

"We're understanding now that we can handle this size group," said Kell, who noted that the many wounded warriors who have made the trip are now recommending others.

"The reality is, I'm taking as many as possible," he said. "We just don't know how long we can keep doing this with the troop pullout at the end of 2011."

With the drawdown of troops continuing over the coming summer months, military assets used to enable the trip will be further taxed, he said.

"We want to get as many guys as we can," he said, "and we'll make it work."



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